

Written in Trees

In the fourteenth-century horticultural manual the *Godfridus super Palladium*, a remarkable passage directs the reader on how ‘To make that wrytynge or peynture shal ben sene in the [kernellis of a peche]’. This process requires a human hand to prize open the ‘skalys’ of the kernels and then ‘writ...or peynte a word or marke’ there. Easy enough, it would seem. Yet this is only the first stage of a process that combines human force and craft with natural growth and multiplication. ‘Diligently berie [the kernels] in the erthe aȝen & let hem abyde there tyl they ben treis,’ the reader is instructed. Once they have grown into trees, all the kernels in the resulting fruit will, we are told, bear this same ‘synge’ (ll. 127-37).

As in other forms of late medieval practical writing, horticultural manuals like the *super Palladium* are ostensibly structured according to the principle that an action outside of the text, in the world, ‘stands as the complement and realization of one’s reading’ (Orlemanski, 2011, 196). In its economy of expression, the instruction that the inscribed kernels simply be afforded the time and space to ‘abyde’ until they are fruit-bearing trees dramatically condenses the duration between human action and arboreal result. This short, seemingly self-contained narrative projects a future in which the kernels *will have grown* into trees. The form of the *super Palladium* intimates just such a stable circuit of human actions and arboreal results. The text comprises a short introduction followed by a list of sixty-seven desired outcomes and the accompanying directions on how they are to be achieved. The opening lines state that it will speak ‘pleynly inow’ regarding its subject matter.

The lowly place of vegetal life within the *scala naturae*, the hierarchical ‘great chain of being’ that structured medieval thought about the cosmos, would seem to lend it to the kind of instrumentalization described in the *super Palladium*. In the Aristotelian world view that underpinned the *scala naturae*, vegetal life partakes only in the first of the three kinds of living or effective soul: nutritive, sensitive, and rational. As John Trevisa writes in his translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De*

proprietatibus rerum, vegetal life is ‘yhud:’ it has ‘no soule of feelynge’ (Trevisa, 1987, 882-3). The endurance of this kind of compartmentalization of vegetal life is clear. After all, the ‘habitual instrumentalization of the entire plant kingdom’ has reached a grim nadir in twenty-first century ‘neoliberal biopolitics’ and its interlocking regimes of hybridization and homogenization of vegetal life in the pursuit of ever-growing profits (Sandilands, 2017, 18, 21).

Yet Trevisa also writes that plants and trees are ‘dyuers in substaunce, in vertu, and in worchyng,’ a statement that sets the scene for a broad-ranging catalogue of vegetal life that revels in its astonishing variety and vitality as well as in its admirable resilience (Trevisa, 1987, 883). That Book Seventeen, on herbs, plants and trees, is the longest of *De proprietatibus rerum* seems appropriate: it is verdant, even overgrown at many points (not unlike the herbals discussed by Lara Farina in her paper on the ‘foliation’ of language). As Michael Marder demonstrates, for all the enduring influence of the Aristotelian three-part distinction of living soul, the ‘open-endedness’ of vegetal life can ‘encroach’ on even the most orderly of classificatory or metaphysical schemes (Marder, 2014, 35).

While somewhat more bounded in their scope than Book Seventeen of *De proprietatibus rerum*, horticultural manuals like the *super Palladium* are another place where the ‘open-endedness’ of vegetal life is a spur to further contemplation of its ‘dyuers...wochyng.’ In the passage described above, the commitment that is being asked of the reader is condensed into the instruction that they let the kernels ‘abyde’ until they are mature, fruit-bearing trees. Neither the work of horticulture nor the work of waiting can be so easily elided, though, not least because the attendant processes are detailed elsewhere in the *super Palladium* and the late medieval horticultural writing tradition. To make these ‘markes’ appear, the reader must plant the seeds in the right kind of soil and at the right time of year, protect and insulate the fledgling shoots, and care for the young trees.

We know as well that things might go wrong or turn out differently to how we intended. No environment, however small or domesticated, exists in isolation:

directions on how to guard against inclement weather, on how to bring dying trees back to life, or how to transport them from one location to another are also included in late medieval horticultural texts. In its intimations of how humans often must ‘bend themselves toward matter,’ the *super Palladium* narrates a complex and contingent relationship between arboreal and human agency (Mitchell, 2014, 133). Made to bear up ‘wrytynge or peynture,’ the peach tree also bears up intimations of the recalcitrance and resistance of nonhuman matter, as well as of the temporalities and inhuman lifespans of vegetal life. As Jessica Rosenberg argues, the endurance of trees so often at the heart of medieval and early modern horticultural writing presents the reader with the uncanny prospect of being ‘outlived’.

The outline of the *super Palladium* I offer above is intended to indicate the literary, theoretical and geographical expansiveness of late medieval horticultural writing (a genre that has received scant attention from literary critics). As in the larger project from which this paper stems, I’m particularly interested in the wide array of connections between language and its inscription, arboreal matter, and what Jeffrey J. Cohen refers to as the ‘creative impulses’ a number of medieval natural philosophers locate in a natural world ‘stirred to action’ by elemental and astral influences (Cohen, 2015, 171). Inscribed in the passage detailing how to make ‘wrytyng or peynture’ appear in peach kernels and at various other points in the *super Palladium*, I argue, is not simply the prospect that receptive *matere* will neatly bear up whatever designs we impart to it. The text also evokes our dependence on arboreal life, as well as the intricacies and eventfulness of material transformation, and the animacy, creativity, and even communicative potential of vegetal life.

Modern scholarship has largely dismissed these directions as oddities, where it has paid any attention to them at all. Yet for all its implausibility, its apparent *lack* of utility, the directive for making writing or painting appear in peach kernels is

characteristic of the *super Palladium*'s investment in the materials and temporalities of vegetal life. The inscribed kernels exemplify the workings of natural artifice that populate horticultural manuals, encapsulating, on a small scale, the complex imbrication of nature and culture that resonates in contemporary ecological theory.

We can also note the association the treatise makes between the technologies of inscription and horticulture; the directives on the grafting of fruit trees recur to the etymology of that term in Old French *grafe* ['stylus' or 'pen'] and Greek *graphein* ['to write']. The peach pit passage and its substitution of animal skin for vegetal interior should also remind us that there would be little art or writing without plant materials. The wooden boards of manuscripts, for instance, and their paper, ink, pigment and dyes, are all dependent on vegetal matter. These materials do not retain their new form indefinitely: ink changes color or fades over time and wooden boards will warp and bend, imparting the book, the enduring symbol of human exceptionality, with nonhuman designs.

Fittingly, Isidore of Seville's etymology for *codex* exposes arboreal roots: 'It is called a codex (*codex*) by way of metaphor from the trunks (*codex*) of trees or vines', Isidore writes, 'as if it were a wooden stock (*caudex*, i.e. an older form of the word *codex*), because it contains in itself a multitude of books, as it were of branches' (142). As *codex* and *corpus*, medieval books were connected to living, arboreal matter both metaphorically and etymologically, but also ontologically and materially. Like the arboreal matter with which it is connected, a *codex* has the potential for growth, change, multiplicity, and decay. It contains within itself 'a multitude of books' in a literal or descriptive sense (a medieval book is a collection of quires), but also in a more expansive philosophical sense: as reworkable matter, a *codex* also contains a multitude of possible futures. Isidore's etymology is materialized in Chaucer's House of Rumour in the *House of Fame*, a weaving together of arboreal materials that also contains 'multitudes'.

Isidore's etymology and its intimations of an ecology of media should also remind us of the materiality of language itself. As Mel. Y. Chen writes in *Animacies*,

her broad-ranging account of contemporary biopolitics and the relations between humans, nonhumans and matter, 'Language is as much alive as it is dead, and it is certainly material' (2012, 53). Chen's comments on the materiality of language and a direction on how to make 'wrytynge or peynture' appear in the kernel of a peach from a fourteenth-century horticultural manual are separated by centuries. Yet they dovetail at the point at which we begin to think about what modern scientists and theorists call 'biosemiotics'. We've long known that plants and trees communicate with each other through touch and display, as well as through undersoil networks of roots and fungi. They also engage in semiosis across species with insects, birds and other animals.

Plants and trees utilise different types of media (in the broadest sense of that word), for a range of purposes, many of which are egalitarian: so-called 'mother trees' redirect nutrients not just to their own progeny, but also to other tree species. In the early 1980s, the cultural theorist and artist Martin Krampen coined the term 'phytosemiotics' to describe these forms of plant semiosis. In a recent article, Michael Marder argues that the more challenging task when thinking about phytosemiotics is not that of framing vegetal communicative acts in the familiar terms of signifier and signified, but to consider how that Saussurean framework is itself challenged by vegetal life's abundant and collaborative strategies of communication. 'Signification,' Marder writes, 'is what a plant is and what it does as part of its life-activity. To speak about phytosemiotics is, by the same token, to discuss the ontology of plants, not a secondary feature of their existence'. Phytosemiotics takes the concept of 'communication' back to its etymological roots: the process of creating a community.

Importantly, phytosemiotics also raises the possibility of what we might think of as *untranslatability* (a concept theorized in intricate detail by Walter Benjamin) or perhaps *indescribability*. In an article for *Wired* magazine, Kate McGowan writes of how plants communicate with each other 'secretly'. Yet I'm not sure that this is the right description. Perhaps the more accurate description is to say that it is simply not *for us*. Do we flatter ourselves (and also anthropomorphize trees and plants) to think

that they desire to conceal their communication from us, as though we'd be able to understand them in any case? To what extent does what Patrícia Vieira identify as the Enlightenment's 'dream of complete translatability' haunt the way we think about plant life and communication (2015, 2)?

In her paper on charms, a genre of medieval writing that is also predicated on texts having particular effects in the world, Susan Crane posits that they establish a textual 'zone of communication with vegetable and mineral realms'. This zone is a good example of the importance of post-anthropocentric analysis in literary studies (of various theoretical stripes). It also directs us toward difficult questions: can interactions in these zones always be affirmative or productive? What happens when translation goes wrong? Or when someone speaks too readily on behalf of others?

By way of a conclusion that is also intended as an intimation of a broader, historically-attuned political ecology, I want to return briefly to this panel's keyword: 'translation'. The use of 'translate' in horticultural manuals invokes the word's earlier, more generalized meaning of material relocation or transfer (*MED* 1a). The word is used in this sense in the *super Palladium* in a direction on the relocation of young rose plants: 'aftyr the space of a 3er thow my3t translate hem', it reads (ll. 248-9).

This use of 'translation' also directs us back to the passage on making writing appear in peach kernels. The *super Palladium* provides a single suggestion for what the reader might inscribe there: the word '*persicus*,' literally 'of Persia.' That is, the text suggests that the reader inscribe a shortened form of the fruit's Latin name – *prunus persica* – in the kernels. *Persicus* records the importation of the peach from Persia to Europe around 300BCE (though the fruit was originally cultivated in China, perhaps as early as 6000BCE). Inscribed with the name assigned by their human cultivators, the peach kernels record the story of their translation ever further

west via cross-cultural contact and the trade routes that connected Persia with the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

Of course, the 'translation' of vegetal life was also one of the key components of the age that followed the medieval (a period in which the *super Palladium* circulated widely in print, alongside numerous other works on horticulture and agriculture). The 'Columbian Exchange', inaugurated at what is conventionally marked as the close of the Middle Ages, gave rise to what scholars in the humanities and social sciences have variously called the Capitalocene / Plantationocene / Homogenocene. All three theses emphasize colonial expansion after 1492 as a seismic ecological event, particularly in regard to practices of plant and crop importation and cultivation. The Homogenocene, popularized by Charles C. Mann in his book *1493*, describes the translation of various forms of vegetal life back and forth across the world (as well as various types of insect, bacteria and virus).

Scholar of Indigenous climate and environmental justice, Kyle Powys Whyte has written extensively on the remaking of North America as a 'vision of displaced Europe' via settler colonialism's interlocking regimes of private ownership, slavery, and the management of vegetal life. Catriona Sandilands has similarly written of how 'plants are the vegetal foundations of capitalism and colonialism' (2017, 25). These are more general, and perhaps more oblique connections, the elaboration of which will be at the centre of the next stage of this research project. Yet they are, I think, pertinent to the broader framing of our conversation and its articulation of the place of medieval literary studies in an evolving environmental humanities.

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